Depot field team keeps B-1B flying

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TINKER AFB, Okla. (AFMCNS) — Tinker civilian maintainers have called Dyess AFB, Texas, home for the past 10 months as they work repairs on the B-1B Lancer that's keeping the entire fleet from being grounded.

Tinker's depot field team deployed to Dyess in March 2003 to inspect and repair the B-1B's wing pivot shear bearing on aircraft assigned to the 7th Bomb Wing. They're still there working a process that calls for inspecting the critical parts, as well as prescribing appropriate repairs for conditions that exceed allowable wear.

"What's happening is the Teflon coating is wearing out and the mechanism is gouging into the wing shear itself," said B-1B engineer John Morgan. "Had this gone on too long, the wing sweep capabilities that enable the large bomber to fly at supersonic speeds would have failed and the entire fleet would have been grounded." Due to the critical nature of the repair, Jerry Hoegger, B-1B aircraft production section chief, said time was of the essence if the team was to make sure the aircraft could maintain its flying schedule. But before any repairs could be done, team members had to overcome a number of obstacles including constraints on time, facilities, support equipment and material resources.

But that didn't slow the efforts of the six-member team consisting of a supervisor and a mix of aircraft, structural and electrical personnel, however. Mr. Hoegger said they met their target of 10 aircraft at 925 man-hours per aircraft ahead of schedule.

And that was on top of a two-month delay.

Mike Macsas, a B-1B work leader, said the team was originally scheduled to begin repairs in January, but didn't get started until March due to a number of support issues.

Even with the delay, however, the team accelerated the schedule and reduced the timeframe from 36 days per aircraft to 30, enabling them to produce another aircraft on top of the original 10, he said.

"After the Air Force told us initially they wanted 10 aircraft for fiscal year 2003, they came back to us and wanted two more," Mr. Macsas said.

"Once we reduced the number of flow days by working around the clock, we could have given them the two additional aircraft if we had the additional dock space. As it was, we were only able to give them the one."

Gary Jones, depot field team supervisor, said being stationed at Dyess has been a long, drawn out process for him and his crew, but they have managed to work around a number of issues and return flyable aircraft back to the Air Force.

"The shear bearing repair itself is straight forward in de-paneling the aircraft, then removing the shear bearings and shear fittings from the wing pivot pin," he said. "After the wing shear fittings are machined at Boeing and returned to Dyess, we build them up, install wear strips and place them on the aircraft.

"All this we've managed to accomplish despite having to work around problems with fuel migration to the wings and a shortage of aerospace ground equipment due to the Air Force's demanding flight schedule." Mike McIntyre, an avionics technician with the depot field team at Dyess, said working on the project has been a lot of hard work, but it's worth it.

"The support from the top has really been outstanding and that tells me we're doing something really important," he said.

"We're trying to get these airplanes out as quick as possible. We've all pulled together as a team and gotten to know each other quite well."

Deward "Junior" Hancock, aircraft training leader at Dyess, said working on the project has been like working at Tinker. In fact, he said, the team has begun to refer to their home away from home as Tinker South.

"It's tough being away from your families, but it pales in comparison to the guys who are stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan," he said. "It's a small price to pay for the freedoms that we have in the U.S."

To date, the depot field team has completed 13 repairs with zero defects, but Mr. Hoegger said six more aircraft are scheduled to be repaired this year.

"Through their professionalism, innovation, persistence, devotion to duty and total commitment to excellence, the depot field team was able to provide the customer with a quality product on time and on budget," he said.

Other members of the depot field team who have been involved with the shear bearing repair since March 2003 include Donald Hurt, Steve Hillian, Robert Hamner, Ronnie Difuntorum, Craig Baumann, Charles Casebolt, Randy Cram, Lewis Hofeld, Jeff Dobler, Mike Smith, Travis Daniel and Debra Williams.

Mr. Jones said the team will likely remain at Dyess until September.